Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church
Fear and Great Joy
Matthew 27: 62-28:10
April 5, 2015
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A national opinion poll recently remarked that something like 87% of the American people said they believed Jesus had risen from the dead. Church ushers – and preachers- know that all 87% are coming to church this morning and hoping to find a good seat. And so it is customary on Easter Sunday for the preacher to scold a little bit and remind the Easter congregation that we will do this again next Sunday. In fact, we gather here, same time every Sunday of the year. Some preachers even take it up another notch and wish everyone Happy Thanksgiving and a Merry Christmas in case you're not coming back until next Easter.

Not me. Not this preacher. Even if you only come to church once a year, this is the day to be here. Gorgeous flowers, inspiring music, everybody dressed up and looking beautiful. There may even be a few hats. In addition, and most important of all, on the agenda today are the biggest issues of all: death-resurrection-fear-hope.

The late John Updike wrote a poem once: Seven Stanzas at Easter. Here are a few lines…..

Make no mistake: if he rose at all
It was as His body;
It was not as the flowers,
Each soft spring recurrent;
It was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the

Eleven apostles;

It was as His flesh; ours.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,

Analogy, sidestepping, transcendence,

Making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded

Credulity of earlier ages:

Let us walk through the door.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,

For our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,

The fact is this is so big; this truth is so huge that we are not sure what to do with it.

So we do exactly what John Updike warned us not to

do: we make it into a metaphor. We reduce it to more manageable proportions that we can live with and manage.

Think of the metaphors: spring flowers, bunnies, eggs, baby chicks. I mean no criticism here because it is all such great fun. I have done and love it all. Easter baskets delivered by the Easter Bunny—that enigmatic, peculiar creation of American marketing, ingenuity. I confess – I never quite got on board here. Santa Claus is at least plausible. But a bunny, a really big bunny, delivering baskets of candy? In any event, I still love it all, and before I left for the airport yesterday, dutifully hid peanut butter eggs, her favorite, around the condo—on book shelves, in

coffee cups and cereal bowls.

There was a particular part of the celebrations that now seems bizarre and cruel. Baby chicks, cute and fluffy, died pink or purple or blue, placed in a cardboard box lined with newspaper and situated next to the kitchen radiator for warmth, fed and watered until they inevitably expired—probably from the trauma of being dyed purple, in a few days. That part of the metaphor is, thanks be to God, long gone.

Easter is about hope and fear: death and resurrection. There are no adequate metaphors.

We think we know all there is to know about death, do we not? Barbara Brown Taylor

says you go to the funeral home, view the body, go home and eat green bean casserole with your neighbors and get on with your life. [Journal for Preachers, Easter 2008] Will Willimon, Duke Chaplain and Methodist Bishop says we live in a world that thinks death has the last word, a world in which we can be persuaded that the best way to deal with death is more death: lose 3,000 civilians in a terrorist attack, invade a country that had nothing to do with it, kill tens of thousands of people. Execute murderers. Kill killers. Deal with death with more death.

That's how it all began – with people like you and me who thought they knew all there was to know about death.

His friends followed him as he taught and healed the sick in the synagogues and villages and hillsides of Galilee. They followed him up that 110 miles road to Jerusalem to observe Passover. They walked beside him in amazement and fear as he proceeded to his death. They were there when the crowds cheered and welcomed him to the city, as he taught in the Temple and watched as opposition to him hardened. They reclined around a table with him on Thursday evening as he broke bread and said, “This is my body” and shared a cup of wine and said, “This is my blood.”

Their fear mounted as an angry mob

surrounded them later that night, arrested him and led him away to this trial for blasphemy and sedition. They did what most of us would do--they ran away, fled in terror, abandoned him to his fate—all but a few women who stayed with him that long night and the next day as he appeared before Pilate, the Roman governor. They were on the edge of the crowd that turned on him and demanded his crucifixion. And they watched from afar as he was stretched out and nailed to a cross and left to die.

The women were still there, the only ones not to flee in terror as the life drained out of him and he said “Father, into these hands I command my spirit.” Peter, James, John, and the rest of them were hiding behind a locked door

as the women watched a good man, Joseph of Arimathea claim the body and bury it in his own garden tomb. The women watched as a large stone was rolled over the opening of the tomb. Then they the others behind that locked door on a back street of Jerusalem.

Saturday morning, Sabbath. Quiet Saturday, nothing happens, empty shops closed. A delegation of old men comes to the royal palace where Pontius Pilate is staying for the weekend. The old men were there yesterday in fact. Now they're back. They are the same religious and political leaders who convinced Pilate that it was in his best interest, and the interests of the Roman Emperor he served, that Jesus of Nazareth be put to death.

That was yesterday. Pilate's soldiers carried out the grisly business of crucifixion and reported that the prisoner was dead and buried. They had accomplished their assignment before the sun went down and the Sabbath began. Mission accomplished.

But now they're back, the same old men who wanted them dead. "Excellency, his disciples are still at large. They could steal the body and claim he rose from the dead and then you'd have a real problem on your hands. Assign a squad of soldiers to stand guard at the tomb." Pilate—irritated, tired of this whole business—"you have a guard posted at your Temple. Use them, " he snapped. "Make it as

secure as you can.”

I love the way Frederick Buechner imagined that very moment: “The venerable old men, their faded old eyes wide with bewilderment, their mouths hanging loose—the kind of dazed tremulous fear of old men suddenly called upon to do a young man’s job. You’re not sure whether to laugh or cry. “As secure as you can,” Pilate said. But how secure is that? Their lips move, but no sounds comes. God knows they have reason to be afraid.” [“The End is Like.” The Magnificent Defeat pp 75-76]

They’re afraid not only that someone might steal the body, Buechner says, but what they’re really afraid of is that what he promised would

happen, that somehow, on the third day, he would stand up and walk out of that tomb. That was their real fear, those old men who thought they knew everything there was to know about death, the power of death, the reality of death, the finality of death, the inevitability of death, the threat and fear of death—such a valuable asset as an instrument of fear and control . But —what if death was not what we thought? What then?

Those women didn’t seem to know the meaning of fear. Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary are up before dawn, heading for the tomb. These women are fearless.

The Biblical account is spare, lean: there is an earthquake, and angel, the guards faint in fear, the stone rolls back, the angel says “Do not be afraid. He is not here. Go tell his disciples.” So they run, their hearts in their throats----and suddenly there is Jesus, standing there. “Greetings,” he says. “Good morning. Don’t be afraid. Go tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee.”

What we must not do is the very thing we most want to do, namely, come up with a rational explanation. Maybe it is his teachings that live on. Maybe his spirit is still with us, like William Shakespeare or the music of Beethoven. Maybe he lives in the flowers of spring. There is no better way to deflect and defuse Easter. So

we will not do it. The resurrection will not submit to rational analysis. Rather it is an event that most suggest that there is truth and reality that transcends logic . There is a God who exists beyond our intellects, our ability to understand.

In the meantime, there are two fears now. The fear of death, as old as the human race, and the fear of life lived in light of a resurrection, which was the fear of those old men trying to secure the tomb, secure themselves from resurrection, that is.

More than Jesus died on Friday afternoon. So did his followers' hope that in him something new and beautiful and hopeful actually had

come on earth. Listening to him teach, watching him with the sick and the children, watching as he gently restored calmness to a poor man in the grip of psychosis, watching as he understands and consoles a desperate father, why—you could almost imagine a world like that —a world where goodness and kindness and gentleness prevailed, not meanness and cruelty and violence. You could almost imagine a world where God wipes tears from all eyes, a world where people of all races, ethnicities and religions sit down together at a banquet table. A world where all the children are fed and all the sick cared for, a world where there are no concealed firearms and innocent children gunned down on city sidewalks, where precious resources are joyfully invested in life, not

weapons systems. A world where religion, religion that takes his name is never used to demean, discriminate against anyone. (See David Davis' A Gospel You Can Taste)

That is what died on Friday. That is what those fearless women were grieving in the early light of dawn. Their dear friend was dead and so, apparently, was the dream, the hope.

But now, if he's alive, so is the dream. Now, if he is alive, so is the hope. Now if he is alive, so can they be, and there is work to do. "Go," he says, "tell my brothers….Go…there is work to do."

The kingdom is still here. It is where you

are. It is wherever you live in my name and wherever you do in my name what I did—heal the sick, free the oppressed, welcome the outcasts. The kingdom, my kingdom, is wherever people seek and work and invest in peace rather than war. Wherever people, in my name, reach across barriers that divide my family—barriers of race, for instance, and gender and sexual orientation and economic class, even religion. “Go,” he says, “its your job now an I promise to go with you and be with you. The hope did not die. The kingdom comes wherever you are—in my name.”

“Do not be afraid,” the angel said. There is a lot to be afraid of these days. War apparently without end, political and social chaos in the

Middle East and Africa, resurgent terrorism that respects no human standard of decency and common humanity, global warming, the end of civil discourse in our own society, violence in the streets, guns and more guns in the hands of anyone and everyone. And beneath all these fears, the primary human, existential fear of what the great philosopher, theologian Paul Tillich called “non being,” i.e. death, and the constant, persistent presence of death. Eugene Peterson writes: “Church is an appointed gathering of people who practice resurrection in a world in which death gets the biggest headlines: death of nations, death of civilizations, death of marriage, death of careers, obituaries without end.” [Practice Resurrection]

But the word today is that death is not what it seemed to be. Because of Easter, death is no longer in charge. Because of Easter, death does not have the last word about us. God des. Because of Easter, we live literally in a new world where the ultimate reality is not the death of all things, including you and me: the ultimate reality is life and in death is God and love everlasting.

The Easter word is not that God will protect you from every danger, that you and will never encounter serious trouble, sickness, or death. The Easter word is that whatever happens to us, God will be with us to comfort, strengthen and uphold. The Easter word is that nothing in

creation, as St. Paul put it, not sickness, not failure, not disappointment, not persecution, not even death itself, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

It ends so quietly, so beautifully. “He is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.” Karl Barth wrote that Easter is not about an empty tomb. It is that “when the disciples lost him through death they were sought and found by him as the Resurrected… Christian do not believe in the empty tomb but the risen Christ. [Placher p 244]

He goes ahead of us—in all the days and years of our futures. We will see him then and when all our days and years are gone, he will

find us and we will see him and greet him.

“Let us not mock God with metaphor, sidestepping transcendence,” the poet advised. “Let us walk through the door.”

So, dear friends, walk through the door into a new reality, a new world in which death has been overcome, replaced by a love that will never die.

You and I are gloriously free. There is no reason to fear. So---walk through the door. You are free to love your dear ones without reservation, free to love without holding back, free to love friends and neighbors and strangers.

Do not be afraid. Fear not. Sing and laugh this day and every day, for Christ our Lord was dead, but is risen and is going ahead of us into the future. There we will see him.

Christ is risen. Hallelujah.